

Sermon
Proper 14, Year C
August 12, 2007
by the Rev. Norman Bray

Whenever I am preparing a sermon I study the readings for the day, looking for a theme that runs through all of the readings. Sometimes that theme leaps out at me and the sermon begins to come together, almost without any strenuous effort on my part. Sometimes there is no readily obvious theme and so I have to find the reading that speaks most powerfully to me at that time and work at it until the sermon reveals itself. Then there are days like today where I was confronted with at least three topics in the Old testament reading, one really strong theme in the Letter to the Hebrews, and three separate stories in the Gospel that could lead almost anywhere. We talk about working with a theology of abundance but when I am trying to write a sermon the abundance of subject matter can make for some hard work in deciding what to talk about. So what has happened today is something that is really new to me. I have almost always stayed firmly in the Gospel when I preach but today's readings opened themselves up to me in the light of a subject that I have been working with lately and the Gospel actually serves as a sort of springboard to get me where I need to go with the Old and New Testament readings serving as a foundation.

September is almost upon us, the time of year when teachers and kids go back to school, we begin Sunday school in earnest, and Stewardship Committees begins the work of talking about pledges so that the Vestry can prepare a budget. I am going with our Stewardship Committee to a workshop on Saturday in Pensacola to help us with that work and the preparation for all of this means that stewardship has been on my mind a lot lately. Now, some of you may be wondering how on earth stewardship is related to today's Gospel and I will admit that it is a tenuous connection but it is one that I could not get away from and that connection comes from this line: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." One of the things that stewardship is concerned with is our treasure. Our time and our talents are also a part of our stewardship and all of these have to be taken as a whole but I am primarily concerned today with treasure because of that line in the Gospel. Many of us work very hard to get ahead in this world, to make a home for our families, to drive a nice car, to care for our children, to save for our retirement. All of those require money and so it is that money has become what we treasure and the very word "stewardship" means taking care of what we have, of what we earn, of what we accumulate. All of us here are stewards this church that has been built and nurtured by those who have gone before us. Our stewardship of St. Luke's honors the stewardship of all of those who have ever been a part of this congregation. But the concept of stewardship is much more than just taking care of what we have, of what God has given to us. The Ecumenical Stewardship Center defines "Stewardship" as being lived out in living and telling the Good News, in sharing God in seeking peace, justice, and the integrity of creation in an interdependent universe; wisely employing God-given human resources, abilities, and relationships; sharing the material resources we hold and giving them in service, justice and compassion, providing for future generations; sharing in the life, worship, and responsible stewardship of the Church and its mission. Both for the individual and for the community, stewardship is a joyful act for the sake of God's world.

Stewardship also implies a giving back to God out of the abundance that we have received and it is grounded in our faith in God. That same faith that allowed Abram, even though he and Sarai were very old, to believe God when God spoke of descendants more numerous than the stars, is the same faith that allows us to be the people of God and share the many blessings that God has given us. One way that we do that is by tithing, the most ancient model that we have for giving, coming from the story of Jacob's vision in Genesis chapter 28 and Jacobs's response to his experience of God. The tithe is simply setting aside a portion of all that we have to give back to God and that portion usually begins at 10% but it is not limited to that number. Tithing helps us worship God more in our lives by acknowledging that all we have comes from God. It encourages spiritual growth and trust in God. Tithing brings God's wisdom to our finances, helping us to exercise a healthy spiritual discipline over them and helping us to fight the destructive materialism and greed that destroy so many lives. Tithing strengthens this congregation, both our ministry and our outreach, enabling us to become true Christian communities of faith, love, and grace. Tithing provides the means to keep priests and missionaries in full time service to God. Tithing indicates moral strength and self-discipline and helps us to develop a stronger sense of trust in God that strengthens our inner life which is the basis of our character. Tithing organizes our lives around God's purpose and helps keep our focus on things eternal, it opens the door for God to use and bless us. God's word teaches us that our obedience puts us in the position to make a difference in the lives of others and to experience God's blessing in our own lives.

I don't think that it would be fair for me to stand here and talk to you about tithing and what it means and why we should make it a part of our spiritual discipline without talking about myself and how I practice stewardship or more specifically, how we give. I have to tell you that coming out of three years of seminary in New York City I am carrying a debt that looks more like a home loan than a student loan and that does cause some anxiety, but we have decided that we will start with the biblical tithe, the 10%, as our entry level. It is hard. It is hard to write that check every month when I know how much I owe to the bank, but I am blessed by also knowing how much I owe to God's generosity and that allows me, no, that compels me to give back to God from the blessings that I have received. I may not be able to continue at this level but this is where I want to begin. This is also where I encourage you to begin. Some of you are already there, some of you are past the 10% level and you deserve our respect and admiration but you need to understand that there is no judgment of success or failure in this. We will all do what we can do and we know that God acts in our lives, both individually and as a Church and we all share our gifts to thank God for His presence and His action in the world. We will use the gifts that God has given us to do the work that God has called us to do, because, like Abram, we believe the Lord and through our stewardship we hope that our faith will be reckoned as righteousness.